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## Students' Views of the Contributing Factors, Effects and Ways to Overcome Islamophobia in Malaysia and the West

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### Abstract

Islamophobia is on the rise in the West, and the spread of it through Western media content has alarmed Muslims around the world including in Malaysia. Islam as a religion peace has been described as a religion that promotes violence. Anti-Islamic sentiment and its adherents increased drastically in Europe, such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom, causing tensions in the communities in those areas. The awarding of Qatar, a Muslim country, to host 2022 FIFA World Cup is the recent example of the case in point. Hence, this paper explores Islamophobia issues in Malaysia and the West from the views of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's students, i.e., knowledge, contributing factors, effects on Muslims, and ways to overcome Islamophobia. A quantitative survey questionnaire was disseminated online to the students and 60 of them responded. The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis method. Results indicate that the students' were knowledgeable about Islamophobia, and they viewed the Western mainstream media as the major factor contributing to the rise of Islamophobia. The students agreed that Muslims in the West received bad treatments as the effects of Islamophobia, and the most effective way to overcome Islamophobia is through the use of online and social media.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia, Anti-Islamic Sentiment, Religious Prejudice, Religious Stereotype, Islamophobia and The Media

## Introduction

Islamophobia is a controversial term that refers to prejudice and discrimination against Islam and Muslims. The term itself was already used in the 1980s but gained its prevalence after the September 11, 2001 attacks. In 1997, the Runnymede Trust defined Islamophobia as "fear and hatred of Islam leading to fear and dislike of Muslims," also stating that it refers to discrimination practices against Muslims by separating them from any economic, social and public life activities. Islamophobia also includes the perception that Islam has difference values compared to other cultures, inferior than Western values and has political violence ideology rather than recognized as religion. Islamophobia also refers to the phenomenon of anxiety or phobia towards Islam. Terms such as 'Muslim radicalization', 'anti-Muslim hate crime', 'anti-Islamic phenomena', 'xenophobia' and 'religiously based hate crimes' are also used frequently. Nevertheless, Islamophobia is still a more popular term and it is now widely used in newspapers, magazines, electronic media and other channels.

In addition, Islamophobia is also an extreme fear, prejudice and hatred of the United States and other European countries towards Islam and Muslims. According to Aziz (2019), the attack on the New York World Trade Center building on September 11, 2001 caused the United States and its European allies to declare war on terrorism. This declaration has also led to the emergence of a phenomenon known as Islamophobia. The impact of the attack has led Islam and Muslims being linked to terrorism. The declaration also made Islamophobia a very serious issue in those countries. This happened due to the role of media and numerous negative reports about Islam and Muslims which aggressively create a false generalization and therefore led to the existence of a bad view towards Islam and Muslims by Western community. This issue becomes worse and more serious when Western societies do not get correct information about Islam and Muslims. For Western societies, Muslims are considered vicious and frightening. In order to avoid engaging with terrorism, they will ostracize and look askance at Muslims around them.

According to Safian et al (2020), Islamophobia is one of people's 'fears' of something related to Islam. Islamophobia appears in various ways including through hate speech. Hate speech is the earliest form of threat against Muslims. There are numerous definitions of Islamophobia. Merriam Webster and Cambridge dictionaries define Islamophobia as "irrational fear, hatred or discrimination against Muslims or those who practice Islam". Meanwhile, according to Lee et al (2018), Islamophobia is seen as a form of racism whether it is Muslim racism or anti-Muslim racism that aims to create differences between the internal group (in-group) and the external group (out-group).

Islam as a religion that hates violence has been described as a religion that promotes violence. Anti-Islamic sentiment and its adherents have increased drastically in Europe, such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom, causing tensions in the communities in those areas. In other words, Islamophobia has linked Islam and Muslims with terrorism and violence.

The spread of Islamophobia which carries hateful values, negative stereotypes and prejudices towards Islam and Muslims through Western media content has alarmed all walks of life in Malaysia. Among the publications that provoked controversy was "Innocence of Muslims" an anti-Islamic short film which has aroused the anger of the Muslim community against those who are seen as constantly provoking the Muslim community. Islam and Muslims seem to be the target of media content publishers in the West. Based on the findings of studies on Islamophobia, most of the world's countries are so obsessed with media content that promotes Islamophobia from the West. A noticeable pattern that can be seen in the film

industry nowadays is that the evil characters in Hollywood films have switched from communism to terrorism especially since the incidents of September 11, 2001 (Lee et al., 2018).

In general, Islamophobia refers to a sense of phobia or anxiety towards Islam, whether its devotees, its teachings, its cultures and anything associated with Islam. According to the UN Special Rapporteur, Islamophobia means "an unfounded hostility and fear of Islam and the result of fear or hatred in Muslims or the majority of them" (Awan and Zempi, 2020). A similar definition is given by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia Report which states that Islamophobia refers to "dread or hatred of Islam and, therefore, to fear or dislike all or most Muslims"; or "irrational fear of Islam or anti-Muslim racism and continuation of anti-Asian and anti-Arab racism" (Saloojee, 2005). Based on these definitions, it can be concluded that Islamophobia refers to a negative perception of Islam in the form of various discriminations motivated by fear and anxiety towards Islam or Muslims.

The negative perception resulting from this phobia towards Islam can be seen in various aspects and this includes a negative view of the laws, values and cultures brought by Islam. This negative perception was confirmed by a Runnymede's report in London entitled "Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All" which specifically stated that "Islam is perceived as a monolithic block, static and unresponsive to change; it is viewed as separate and "other"; it does not have values in common with other cultures, is not affected by them and does not influence them. Islam is seen as inferior to the West; it is considered barbaric, irrational, primitive and sexist; Islam is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, and supportive of terrorism and engaged in a "clash of civilizations" (The Runnymede Trust, 2017; The Runnymede Trust 1997). The summary made by Runnymede verifies that Islam has been seriously misunderstood by many, especially non-Muslim communities in the West (Hasan, 2013).

The awarding of Qatar as a Muslim country to host the FIFA World Cup in 2022 is an example of the recent case in point. Since the announcement, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2010, of Qatar to host 2022 FIFA World Cup, it has been mostly negative coverage by the Western media of Qatar's success in their bid (Dun, 2014). The Western media spread of Islamophobia was relentless. Among others, the issues of treatment of migrant workers, restrictions on alcohol, and homosexuality were played by the Western media to tarnish the reputation of the first Islamic Arab desert nation to host the Cup. However, it was also countered by many positive postings of the fans around the world in social media who experienced first hand the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar.

The purpose of this research is to further explore Islamophobia issues in Malaysia and the West in terms of the level of knowledge about Islamophobia, the factors that led to Islamophobia, the effects of Islamophobia on Muslims, and the ways to overcome Islamophobia issues. Furthermore, this research aims to identify appropriate ways to address the problem of Islamophobia. Therefore, this research was conducted using quantitative method, whereby 60 students of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) responded to the questionnaires on Islamophobia. The comparison between Malaysia and the West is to find out the current and latest views and knowledge of the students related to Islamophobia on the factors, effects and also the effective ways to overcome the issue of Islamophobia.

### **Brief Review of Literature**

The literature on Islamophobia is divided into two parts, i.e., first is the past studies on the perspectives and issues of Islamophobia in Malaysia, and second is the past studies related to

Islamophobia in the West which focus on the situation of Islamophobia after the 9/11 incident.

A study by Ramli et al (2020) entitled "Identifying Islamophobia in Malaysian Buddhist Context" discusses the forms and levels of Islamophobia among Buddhists in Malaysia. The study found that the form of Islamophobia among Buddhists in Malaysia is based on their opposition to the issue of Islamization and certain policies that have the potential to threaten the survival of the religion and followers in practicing their religion. The study also discovered the level of Islamophobia among Malaysian Buddhists was in a state of fear and vulnerability. In this study, the issue regarding the current situation of the Islamophobia level in Malaysia has been interpreted based on the acceptance level of some Buddhists. Thus, there is a need to reconcile their understanding of Islam and Muslims, in addition to strengthening good relations at all levels of different religions.

Osman (2019) believed that Islamophobia among non-Muslim communities is a direct reaction to the rise of Islamic politics which has led to religious and racial discrimination against these communities. This can be seen clearly from the manifestations of Islamophobia in Malaysian context. The author stated that majority of Islamophobic expressions occur in cyberspace usually in response to articles related to racist actions against non-Malays in the country or actions by the majority of Muslim population that seek to restraint the rights of non-Muslims. Anti-government and anti-Islamic sentiments are also occurring among the community in Malaysia which are expressed through the media. Hence, it is important for the relevant government bodies to address the misunderstanding of Islamic teachings by some non-Muslim communities in Malaysia.

Studies related to Islamophobia also move towards international politics. Esposito and Kalin (2011) in "Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century" outlined their main framework referring to the concept of Islamophobia towards the multiculturalism society besides discussing the differences in the rise of Islamophobia in the United States and other European countries. The authors have exemplified several countries such as the Netherlands, Austria, Germany and the United Kingdom regarding the increase of prejudicial attitudes and discrimination against Muslims. Subsequently, they also discussed about the United States policies under the George Bush administration after the incidents of 9/11 as well as President Obama's political actions in dealing with the anger of Muslims due to the stereotypes manifestation against Muslims to the emergence of the narrative of Islamophobia.

In addition, d'Appollonia and Reich (2010) discussed issues related to community integration, national security and civil liberties. In this context, d'Appollonia and Reich (2010) further elaborated on the formulation of national policies as well as the legitimate coercion against the Muslim minorities by exemplifying several countries such as the United States, France, Germany, Britain and Italy shed light on the extent of impact regarding the implementation of public policies on the issue of Islamophobia in Malaysia and the West.

On the other hand, Cainkar (2009) discusses about the collective experience of Arab community (Muslims and non-Muslims) living in metropolitan Chicago. Through sociological and ethnographic studies, Cainkar provided a concrete data to support his hypothesis that the Arab community experienced feelings of uncertainty due to a social environment that was considered insecure in the following years after the 9/11 tragedy. A significant finding of the study is the mistreatment experienced by Arab-Americans which did not occur in a vacuum or hidden form, but instead was translated explicitly. The study discovered that the stereotype of Arabs as a violent race has explained the cause of chaos in the Middle East

throughout the 20th century, and it is easier for people to make them scapegoats for any violent activity.

### Methodology

Primary data were collected a quantitative method, i.e., a questionnaire survey conducted online due to the movement control order during COVID-19 pandemic, and 60 respondents among the students of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) responded. The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis method, i.e., frequency analysis technique, and presented in the forms of figures and tables to display the frequency and percentage values.

### Research Findings and Discussions

This section presents demographic profile of the respondents, their knowledge of Islamophobia, and the results of data analysis related to the factors that trigger Islamophobia, the effects of Islamophobia on Muslims and ways to overcome Islamophobia.

#### Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1 shows a total of 60 respondents have answered the questionnaires. The majority of them are female (78.3%), 19-25 years old (91.6%), Malay ethnic (93.3%), and Muslim (86.7%).

Table 1

*Demographic Profile of the Respondents*

Demographic Characteristics		Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	13	21.7
	Female	47	78.3
		<b>60</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Age	18 years & below	1	1.7
	19 – 25 years	55	91.6
	26 – 29 years	1	1.7
	30 years & above	3	5.0
		<b>60</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Race	Malay	56	93.3
	Chinese	1	1.7
	Indian	1	1.7
	Others	2	3.3
		<b>60</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Religion	Islam	52	86.7
	Buddha	2	3.3
	Hindhu	3	5.0
	Christian	2	3.3
	Others	1	1.7
		<b>60</b>	<b>100</b>

#### Knowledge of Islamophobia

Table 2 demonstrates that a majority of respondents (90%) reported that they knew about Islamophobia, had their acquaintances involved in Islamophobic activities (88.3%), and had attended an activity or event related to Islamophobia (58.3%). Therefore, according to Siah

et al (2022), it is important to increase knowledge of each other’s cultures and religions, besides only contacts between Muslims and non-Muslims, to reduce Islamophobia and increase harmony among different ethnic groups in Malaysia.

Table 2  
*Knowledge of Islamophobia*

Number	Items	Yes		No	
		Number (N)	Percentage (%)	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
1.	Knowledge about Islamophobia	54	90.0	6	10.0
2.	Knowledge about the involvement of others in Islamophobia activities	53	88.3	7	11.7
3.	Attendance in Islamophobia Activities/Events	35	58.3	25	41.6

**Factors that Cause Islamophobia**

Table 3 illustrates that the majority of respondents (95.0%) agreed that the migration factor as well as influence of media and Islamophobia movement have led to the rise of Islamophobia. This finding is supported by Istriyani and Yuliatun (2016) in that media has a dichotomy function, i.e., as the cause for the outbreak of Islamophobia symptoms and as an information agent which has role to provide education and social change effects at the same time. However, in the recent years the Western media has increasingly becoming a major factor in causing the spread and turmoil of Islamophobia.

Additionally, the majority of respondents (91.7%) said 'yes' that the rise of Islamophobia is due to the misunderstanding of the majority of the western community about Islam. According to Mohamad (1997) Islam is probably the most misunderstood religion in the world, and among the misunderstandings is the act of terrorism by a Muslim is attributed to the religion of Islam but the same act committed by a person of other faiths is not attributed to his/her religion. The majority of respondents (90.0%) also said 'yes' that Islamophobia occurs due to the lack of knowledge and exposure about the issue of Islamophobia.

Inaccurate, prejudice and stereotype information or news about Muslims and Islam, such as unconfirmed accurateness link of bombings with the militant such as ISIS, cause excessive fear and prejudice towards Muslims and Islam that are less grounded (Istriyani and Yuliatun, 2016). According to Allen (2007) Islamophobia causes span from an act of violent such as the high-profile murder of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands to a complaint about irresponsible parking during Friday prayers.

Table 3

*Factors that Cause Islamophobia*

Number	Items	Yes		No	
		Number (N)	Percentage (%)	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
1.	Migration	57	95.0	3	5.0
2.	Influence of media and Islamophobia movement	57	95.0	3	5.0
3.	Misunderstanding about Islam by the the majority of the western community	55	91.7	5	8.3
4.	Lack of knowledge and exposure to the issue of Islamophobia	54	90.0	6	10.0

***Effects of Islamophobia on Muslims***

Figure 1 indicates that the majority of repondents (88.3%) agreed to statement 1 that Muslims feel threatened when they go to places with high level of Islamophobia. On statement 2, Islamophobia has made the situation in the West no longer safe for Muslims, the majority of respondents (65.0%) agreed.

The majority of respondents (86.7%) also agreed to statement 3 that Muslims are subjected to various forms of verbal, physical and emotional harassment. Majority of respondents (66.7%) also agreed to statement 4 that Muslims' rights are discriminated and denied as workers in the employment sector in the West.

On statement 5, the majority of respondents (61.7%) agreed to the statement that Muslim women who wear hijabs are seen as strange and despised in the West. Additionally, the majority of respondents (73.3%) agreed to statement 6 that Muslims are considered by the West as terrorists. On statement 7, the majority of respondents (66.7%) agreed that Muslims are considered by the West to dislike peace.



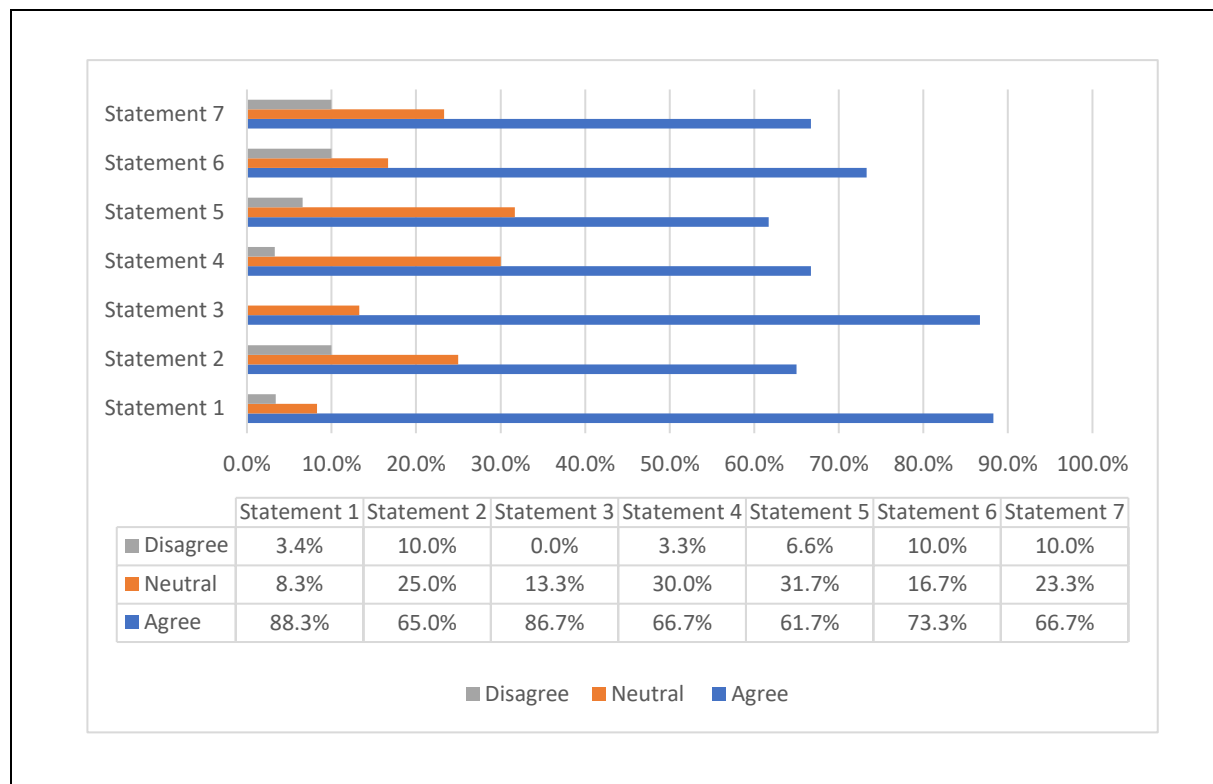


Figure 1: The Effects of Islamophobia on Muslims

These findings are supported by a study of public opinions of majority and minority groups in multiple western countries (i.e., Italy, France, Germany, United Kingdom, Canada, and United States) about various aspects of respect, treatment, and tolerance relative to Muslims worldwide (Gallup 2011). This study found that many Muslims report not feeling respected by those in the West (i.e., 52% of Americans, 48% of Canadians, 38% of Brits, 34% of Germans, 30% French, and 28% of Italians say the West does not respect Muslim societies). This study also found that Muslims are among the top three groups of people that are least desirable for the western people to have as neighbors after drug addicts and homosexuals, and 48% of Muslims have experienced religious discrimination as compared to 31% of Mormon, 25% of no religion, 21% of Jewish, 20% of Catholic, and 18% of Protestant.

**Ways to Overcome Islamophobia**

There are 58 (96.7%) respondents agreed or said 'yes' that there are ways to overcome Islamophobia while only 2 respondents or 3.3% said 'no'. Table 4 displays the respondents' views on roles that most instrumental in overcoming Islamophobia. The answer options given are I; media; da'wah (preaching); I, media and da'wah (preaching); I and media; and also, media and da'wah (preaching).

Table 4

*Instrumental Roles in Overcoming Islamophobia*

Role	Respondents (N)	Percentage (%)
I	6	10.0
Media	9	15.0
Da'wah (Preaching)	2	3.4
I, media, da'wah	35	58.3
I, media	5	8.3
Media, da'wah	3	5.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The majority of respondents (58.3%) stated that the joint roles of themselves, the media and da'wah are most instrumental in overcoming Islamophobia. It is clear that each party needs to play a role in overcoming Islamophobia. These findings are supported by Istriyani and Yuliatun (2016) in that media plays the most instrumental role in addressing Islamophobia. A well-orchestrated online and social media campaigns are also found to be effective in combating and resisting the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of Islamophobia (Khamis, 2018).

Table 5 shows the majority of respondents (93.3%) agreed to the statement that virtual preaching approach can help in dealing with Islamophobia. The majority of respondents (98.3%) also said yes to the statement that a mosque is an institution that should be active in spreading knowledge to deal with the issue of Islamophobia. Additionally, majority of respondents (90.0%) said yes to the statement that publishing Islamic programmes will enable the dealing with Islamophobia. Majority of respondents (96.7%) also said yes to the statement that using media to increase public awareness about Islamophobia can address Islamophobia.

As for whether the respondents agree with the statement that forums, workshops and dialogues are able to open public's eyes about the true Islam, majority of the respondents (93.3%) said yes to the statement. Respondents' reaction to the statement that continuous Islamophobia awareness and understanding programs carried out at the mosque, district, state and national levels are able to address Islamophobia indicates that majority of the respondents (96.7%) said yes to the statement.

Table 5

*Ways in Overcoming Islamophobia*

Ways	Agree		Disagree	
	Respondents (N)	Percentage (%)	Respondents (N)	Percentage (%)
Da'wah (Preaching)	56	93.3	4	6.7
Mosque Activity	59	98.3	1	1.7
Publishing Islamic Programmes	54	90.0	6	10.0
Using Media	58	96.7	2	3.3
Forums, Workshops and Dialogues	56	93.3	4	6.7
Continuous Islamophobia Awareness and Understanding Programs	58	96.7	2	3.3
Respecting Others' Religion	59	98.3	1	1.7
Muslim Personalities	58	96.7	2	3.3
Information and Communication Technology (ICT)	59	98.3	1	1.7

On the statement that respecting others' religion helps Muslims to deal with Islamophobia, the majority of respondents (98.3%) said yes to the statement. On the respondents' view on Muslim personalities can assist in dealing with Islamophobia indicates that the majority of respondents (96.7%) said yes to the statement, hence clearly expressed the important role of Muslim characters. On the statement that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can support in dealing with Islamophobia, the majority of respondents (98.3%) also said yes to the statement.

A responsible reporting where the mainstream media in Sweden emphasizing that a whole community cannot be held responsible for the actions of an individual for Stockholm bombings in 2010 (Larsson, 2010) contributes to address Islamophobia. However, in the recent years mainstream media in the west display the opposite role, i.e., actively fueling Islamophobia. Hence, many researchers (Istriyani and Yuliatun, 2016; Khamis, 2018; Pujiati and Mubarak, 2022) agreed that media, in particular, online and social media is the most effective way in addressing the issue of Islamophobia. Online or social media display a real and raw truth of people's experience as compared to the edited and full of agendas of the

mainstream media. For instance, the posts in social media by many FIFA World Cup fans of their experience in Qatar, a Muslim majority country, about Muslims and Islam are more believable than the news reported by reporters of the mainstream media.

### Conclusion

Over the past few years Islamophobia has increased in many European countries or non-Muslim countries and they have considered Muslims as terrorists. This has affected Muslims around the world including Malaysia. The results of this study on the views of UKM’s students about Islamophobia can be concluded as they were being knowledgeable about Islamophobia, they viewed western media (especially the western mainstream media) as the major factor contributing to the rise of Islamophobia, they agreed that Muslims received bad treatments (such as threat, abused, and discrimination) especially in the West as the effects of Islamophobia, and they were in the opinion of the most effective way to overcome Islamophobia is through the use of the media including online and social media (Table 6).

Table 6  
*Summary of Major Conclusions*

Construct	Conclusion
Knowledge of Islamophobia	The average percentage of students being knowledgeable of Islamophobia is 78.9 percent or around the average of 47.3 students out of 60 students participated in this study.
Factors that cause Islamophobia	Migration and influence of media and Islamophobia movement reported by 95.0 percent or 57 students as the major cause of Islamophobia although a high percentage of students also reported that misunderstanding about Islam by the majority of the western community (91.7 percent or 55 students); and lack of knowledge and exposure to the issue of Islamophobia (90.0 percent or 54 students).
Effects of Islamophobia on Muslims	Majority of students agreed that Muslims feel threatened when they go to places with high level of Islamophobia (88.3 percent or 53 students); Islamophobia has made the situation in the West no longer safe for Muslims (65.0 percent or 39 students); Muslims are subjected to various forms of verbal, physical and emotional harassment (86.7 percent or 52 students); Muslims’ rights are discriminated and denied as workers in the employment sector in the West (66.7 percent or 40 students); Muslim women who wear hijabs are seen as strange and despised in the West (61.7 percent or 37 students); Muslims are considered by the West as terrorists (73.3 percent or 44 students); and Muslims are considered by the West to dislike peace (66.7% or 40 students).

Ways to overcome Islamophobia	Majority of students were in the opinion that a combination of three mediums, i.e., themselves, the use of media and the activity of da'wah, are instrumental in overcoming Islamophobia (58.3 percent or 35 respondents). Additionally, the students agreed that da'wah; mosque activity; publishing Islamic programmes; media use; forums, workshops and dialogues; continuous Islamophobia awareness and understanding programmes; respecting other's religion; Muslim personalities; and information and communication technology (ICT) are the ways to overcome Islamophobia (an average percentage of 95.7 percent or an average of 57.4 students).
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The importance and significance of this study is it sheds light on the current issues or latest situations related to Islamophobia in Malaysia and the West from the views of students on the factors, effects and also the relevant ways to overcome the issue of Islamophobia. Additionally, it provides the latest findings on the main factors contributing to Islamophobia including internal and external factors, and identifies some solutions to address the issue of Islamophobia.

This study makes a theoretical contribution to the literature on the issue of Islamophobia by explaining a phenomenon of Islamophobia from the perspectives of students comparatively between the situations of Islamophobia in Malaysia and the West. Indirectly, this study contributes to the literature on the discussion about Islamophobia related theories such as Critical Race Theory in that religious disadvantage that due to Islamophobia is separate than racial disadvantage, hence the needs of different methods to address it. Contextually, this study contributes the perspectives of students in Malaysia on the issue of Islamophobia in the context of two different countries, i.e., Malaysia and the West, which interestingly illustrated their views that Islamophobia in the West perpetuating by the Western media are impacting Muslims around the world, and that ways to overcome the issue of Islamophobia are of the responsibility of the Muslims around the world as well.

Therefore, despite the unfortunate effects of Islamophobia on Muslims, there are several lessons to be learned. Muslim communities in Muslim countries like Malaysia need to present a good example of characters that show the true Islam such as to have good attitudes towards other religions as taught by Islam. Muslims need to convince non-muslims around the world that Islam is not a terrorist or a cruel religion but Islam is a religion of peace. Qatar as the first Muslim country to host the FIFA World Cup in 2022 and is the best example of this. The tournament that involved its fans around the world is an effective platform for the world communities to experience the true Islam. With this effort, Muslims may be able to eliminate the wrong perception towards Islam and Muslims and eventually this Islamophobia issues will go away and disappear.

As this study only focus to the views of UKM's students, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all universities' students in Malaysia, and further studies should be conducted to include students of other universities in Malaysia on the problem of

Islamophobia. In addition, future studies should also extend on the problem of Islamophobia in other Asian countries in comparison with the West.

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